

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION and VISION

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What is a Comprehensive Plan?

A Comprehensive Plan is a long-range community plan which covers a period of twenty to thirty years; however, many of the strategies contained within this Plan may be targeted for implementation much sooner. A comprehensive plan considers a community's existing and future needs for dwellings, commerce, industry, public and semi-public facilities, environmental protection, historic preservation, transportation, and recreation. The land use component of a comprehensive plan should represent an integrated mosaic of compatible uses that will guide the community in the direction of achieving its goals and "vision" for the future. The City of Falls Church created such a vision as part of this comprehensive planning process. It is printed in a later section of this chapter.

Section 15.2-2230 of the Virginia State Code requires that comprehensive plans be reviewed at least once every five years, and where appropriate, amended. The Planning Commission is responsible for preparing the City's Comprehensive Plan pursuant to the authority of the Falls Church Charter, Chapter 17 Planning, Zoning and Subdivision Control, Section 17.04 Master Plan, generally.

As required by law, the Comprehensive Plan should be general in nature, showing the Planning Commission's long-range recommendations for the general development of the territory with due consideration or inclusion of the statutorily enumerated elements of Section 15.2-2223.

Brief History of the City's Development

The City's roots go back to its settlement in 1699 when this area was an early colonial establishment shared with native Indians. The center of the community and its namesake, was The Falls Church (Episcopal), attended by both President George Washington and Virginia statesman George Mason. It was built in 1734 and remains important in the City's landscape today. Falls Church became a township in 1875 and an independent city in 1948.

Growth in the township and the surrounding area occurred as the result of the community's strategic location just seven miles from the District of Columbia. The Leesburg Turnpike (today's Leesburg Pike/Route 7) was built to bring commerce from Leesburg to the port of Alexandria. In 1860 the Alexandria, Loudoun, and Hampshire (later the Washington and Old Dominion) Railroad brought rail service to Falls Church, connecting it to Alexandria and Leesburg. After the Civil War, a direct rail link to Washington attracted numerous new residents who found the tranquil village a welcome relief from the bustle of the nation's capital. Trolley

service came to the town in the early twentieth century.

In the years following World War II, Falls Church's cohesiveness and character were increasingly impacted by the Northern Virginia building boom and the advent of automobile-related commercial development. In 1948 Falls Church became a city.

During the 1950s and 1960s Northern Virginia experienced a dramatic increase in suburban growth, both residential and commercial. The area's highways were being constructed to provide convenient transportation within the region and especially to the District of Columbia, the region's largest employment center. Commercial development also began to take shape in the form of what we know today as "strip commercial," or commercial development occurring in narrow bands along major roadways. Falls Church was also impacted by these trends.

During the 1970s and 1980s the City of Falls Church continued to experience small amounts of residential and commercial growth, but this growth was limited by the amount of available vacant land. This level of growth has become even smaller during the 1990s as the number of vacant parcels declines; however, redevelopment projects are anticipated during the next two decades.

Note: For a more complete History of the City of Falls Church, see Chapter 9 -- **Historic Preservation**.

History of Planning in Falls Church

In 1934 Fairfax County, including what would become the City of Falls Church, adopted a zoning ordinance pursuant to the laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Master Plans were subsequently adopted by the City in 1947, 1959, 1978, 1988, and 1997. The 1947 and 1959 Master Plans were comprised of a series of maps with no text, whereas the 1978 and 1988 Plans contained limited text including primary and secondary policy objectives and a brief description of programs and activities to achieve those objectives. The 1997 and 2005 Comprehensive Plan go into much greater detail about existing conditions within the City. These two plans also describe the basis for its strategies and go into detail about how they might be implemented. The 1997 Comprehensive Plan was also the first plan to covers topic areas such as historic preservation and community character.

During the past twenty years a number of planning-related studies have been completed by City staff, independent consultants, or for the Arlington-Falls Church area by Arlington County staff with Falls Church City staff participation. The following is a list of these studies, many of which are described within the various chapters of this document.

Draft Master Plan Review: Land Uses in the City's Business Areas, October 1984 (Planning Department)

North Washington Street Corridor Special Strategy Area Report, Phase I, January 1986 (Planning Department)

East Falls Church Land Use Study, January, 1986 (Arlington County Department of Community Affairs, Housing and Community Development Division, Planning Section)

The Arlington-Falls Church Ad-Hoc Planning Committee, Final Report, June 1987

South Washington Street Corridor Special Strategy Area Report, Phase I, July 1987 (Planning Department)

Central Business District Special Strategy Area Report, Phase I, October 1988 (Planning Department)

Fiscal Year 91-92 Master Plan Review: Status Report on Implementation of the Master Plan (Planning Department)

Building the Vision: The Washington Street Corridor, January 1991 (Hyett-Palma, Inc.)

The Future of the City: Genesis for Progress in Falls Church -- North Washington Street, March 1993 (The Falls Church Village Preservation and Improvement Society)

Redevelopment in Falls Church: Four Illustrative Opportunities, November, 1997 (David Holmes and Larry Keller)

Falls Church City Center Strategic Plan, February, 2002 (Street-Works)

The City Today – ~~1997~~ 2005

The City of Falls Church is an independent city, 2.2 square miles in area with approximately 10,600 residents. Located seven miles from Washington, DC, with its center at the junction of Routes 7 (Broad Street) and 29 (Washington Street/Lee Highway), the City is bounded by Arlington and Fairfax Counties. It is also roughly equidistant from the major commercial centers of Ballston in Arlington County, Tysons Corner near Vienna, and Baileys Crossroads in Fairfax County. The City is serviced by several major transportation links, including I-66 and the East and West Falls Church Metro Stations.

Falls Church is a tight knit community with residents who take great pride in being active in civic and social activities. The City is committed to retaining and enhancing its predominantly small-town residential character, while encouraging growth and redevelopment in its commercial corridors. The construction of one mixed-use (commercial and residential) project was completed in 2004. Three other similar projects will be constructed in the commercial corridors by 2007. Interest by developers in other sites within the corridors has been expressed, and the

City is planning a significant level of new mixed-use development in the six to eight blocks surrounding the intersection of Broad Street and Maple Avenue during the next 10 years.

Changing demographic patterns within the City are affecting the need for various public services and housing types. An increasing number of school age children and persons over age 65 are creating greater demands for the City's school system and for senior housing and services.

All of these factors must continue to be analyzed and considered in the management of the City to create a sustainable community with a positive future. This Comprehensive Plan examines current conditions and offers guidance to enhance the City's economic and social functions, livability, and appearance for the common good of its residents and businesses.

The Process for the Formulation of this Plan

The previous Falls Church Master Plan was last reviewed and amended in 1997. This Comprehensive Plan, prepared in 2005 for public hearing and adoption, is the product of a several year review of the document. A number of public workshops, some co-sponsored by the League of Women Voters, and a total of fourteen public hearings were held during this plan amendment process.

Vision for the City of Falls Church

A "vision," as used today in the planning profession, is a statement that describes a positive scenario for the future of a community. It represents the hopes and desires of that community for what their surroundings will be like at some point in the future. As part of the initial process for creating this Comprehensive Plan, the City of Falls Church held a public forum in June, 1994. Based on input received at this forum, the following vision was created. It is a portrait of Falls Church that its residents hope they and future residents will enjoy twenty years hence. This vision can be achieved through the implementation of this Comprehensive Plan.

The City will continue as a vibrant and thriving enclave in the Northern Virginia region, inhabited by citizens and businesses who believe strongly in community involvement and spirit. The City will be recognized as an urban village with an attractive balance of uses. This character will be conveyed visually through the cohesive architecture and urban design of the commercial districts, which complements the residential neighborhoods, and through the successful preservation and rehabilitation of the City's historic resources. The social and cultural focus of the City will be City Center and the Cherry Hill/municipal complex, which will be linked with three economic focal points: West Broad Street, the Broad Street and Washington Street intersection, and the Washington Street corridor. Emphasis will be on commercial and residential design that promotes a human scale and a pedestrian orientation, as well as accessibility by foot, bicycle, public transit, and automobile. South Washington Street will also be a strong and revitalized contributor to the economic life of the City.

Redevelopment efforts will encourage mixed residential and commercial uses in the business areas to promote lively downtown centers.

The City's commercial base will be flourishing, serving the greater Falls Church community, but also attracting people from throughout the region to eat, shop, and meet in the commercial centers. The City will have attractive office spaces located within walking distance of restaurants and shops. Public-private collaboration will result in the creation of public gathering places for cultural events and meetings.

Education will continue to be a high priority for the City. Schools will be maintained as high quality public facilities, commensurate with the continuing academic excellence for which the City is known, and will serve as an important focus for community, social, and cultural activities. Local educational services will expand to include institutes of higher education and an extension of educational opportunities to all City residents. The addition of these higher education resources will draw new ideas from the region and perhaps from beyond, from which the entire community will benefit. The City's library will remain an integral component of the excellent educational system.

All areas of the City will be highly accessible both internally and from the region via a range of public and private transportation alternatives, complementing the most common choice of transportation, the automobile. Neighborhoods, shopping, recreation, and schools will be linked in a variety of ways including public transit, pedestrian paths, and bikeways. This choice of modes of transport will contribute to the region's efforts to improve air quality. The City recognizes the importance of regional cooperation and is an active participant in issues requiring regional solutions.

The City will continue to be committed to environmental protection, preservation, and restoration, and will provide a wide range of opportunities for residents to interact with the natural environment. Trees will be recognized as a valuable economic, environmental and aesthetic resource. Development decisions will be guided by a respect for the natural topography of the land. Efforts will have been made toward restoration of those streams and watercourses capable of supporting a diverse population of native species in a healthy aquatic ecosystem. Stream degradation from development will be mitigated. Natural streams and watersheds will be preserved, and water quality in local waterways, which ultimately lead to the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay, will be improved. A network of trails and greenspaces, both public and private, will link the City's neighborhoods to surrounding areas. Planning for open space will also provide for active recreation and sports.

The City will remain attractive to a wide range of family types, cultures, and generations, including single-person households, those with children, and citizens in retirement, embracing the City's varied ethnic and cultural diversity. A diverse housing stock will provide opportunities to all income levels and family types. The established housing stock will be complemented by new housing, harmonious in scale to the existing neighborhoods.

A vibrant community depends on all of these factors - economic, educational, social, and environmental - working together in an integrated whole. Falls Church in the year 2025 will continue to strive to meet the needs of all people who live, work, and do business here.

How this Plan should be Utilized

This Comprehensive Plan is meant to be used in both a reactive and proactive manner to achieve the overall future vision for the City. It is the official policy guide for future decisions related to public and private development. It will be used in a reactive manner in terms of the evaluation of applications for development projects. In these instances this document will be consulted to determine the appropriateness of the proposed projects in terms of the Plan's goals, strategies, and implementation steps. This Plan is also a guide for decision-makers to determine the best course of action in proposed matters that could affect the City's physical and social fabric, including its economy, natural features, public facilities, transportation network, historical resources, housing facilities, and the use of land. A number of the goals and strategies included in this Plan also direct the City to be proactive in taking certain measures that will move it closer to its ultimate vision. Many of these proactive measures involve the creation of programs and studies, while others involve the analysis of existing City policy documents and procedures to ensure that they are in compliance with the policies represented in this Plan and in the City's vision.

Amendments to this Plan and Planning Commission ~~Permit~~ Procedures

Section 15.2-2229 of the Virginia State Code (and Section 17.07 of the City Charter) sets forth that after the adoption of the comprehensive plan, all amendments to the plan shall be recommended, and approved and adopted by the Planning Commission and City Council. If the Council desires an amendment to the plan, it may direct the Planning Commission to prepare an amendment and submit it to public hearing within sixty days after formal written request by the Council.

Section 17.07 of the Charter requires that after adoption of the Plan, no street, square, park or other public way, ground, open space, school, public building or structure, shall be constructed or authorized until and unless the general location, character and extent thereof has been submitted to the Planning Commission and until the Commission has determined that the general location, character and extent are in conformance with the Comprehensive Plan.

How this Plan is Structured

The Comprehensive Plan is organized into ten chapters. The first chapter includes a brief history of the City and of the formulation of this Plan and the vision upon which this Plan is based. A Demographics chapter includes information about the City's social characteristics -- population, households, and employment. The remaining nine chapters include detailed information, goals, strategies, and implementation techniques for the following topic areas: Community Character, Appearance, and Design; Land Use and Economic Development; Natural Resources and the Environment; Parks, Open Space, and Recreation; Transportation; Community Facilities, Public Utilities, and Government Services; Historic Preservation; and Housing. Each of these chapters contains two sections. The first section provides background information and an analysis of existing conditions for the functional topic area. This information provides a baseline from which assumptions are drawn and established, leading to projected future trends. The second section of each chapter consists of goals and strategies and a description of implementation methodology. These two sections form a general guide for the orderly physical growth and development of the City and identify the means by which the City intends to implement the "vision."